CHRIST FOR OUR TIME
Reflections on the Sculpture and
Paintings on the Theme of Christ Teaching,
by Jack Greaves
Matthew 16:13-20
May 27, 1979

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The Thirteenth century Philosopher and Saint of the Roman Church, Bonaventure, once described painting as "open scripture for those who could not read". Sometimes, even literate people need help in expressing the most deeply felt emotions. We know, I think, that words - written or spoken - are not always adequate, particularly our words. We find that our inarticulate feelings are reflected, amplified and expressed by people with a special gift of sensitivity: Shakespeare, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Frost. Who has not discovered that music communicates feeling much more expressively than words? J.S.Bach's Come Sweet Death is a powerful piece of music and moves people to tears quite apart from its subject matter. Beethoven's Ode to Joy in the Ninth Symphony soars with profound gladness. Even a sentimental love song manages to say more than most of us can put into our own words.

Likewise, visual art expresses what words cannot: for instance, the stained glass windows, the table and cross, the shape of the building and, of course, "Christ Teaching". As the thirteenth century Saint observed, painting and sculpture can be open scripture, God's living word can be appropriated through art; not instead of the spoken and written Word, but in addition to speaking and writing simply because in art the the Word can find fullness and richness and depth which words do not and cannot convey.

My sermon this morning uses for a text a work of art: the sculpture and paintings, "Christ Teaching", commissioned for Broad Street Presbyterian Church as a memorial gift and dedicated two weeks ago. There is a sense in which the sculpture, as well as sermon, grows out of the scripture we heard this morning: the question Jesus posed to His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

The commissioning of sculpture for a church was unusual. There are some, but not many, objects of serious art in Protestant churches. Pieces of sculpture are rare and sculpture depicting Jesus is almost non-existent - in the church. There are several reasons, and I thought it might be interesting this morning to examine them.

Twentieth century Presbyterians have roots in four separate historical sources: Old Testament Judaism, the culture of the Greeks and Romans which was our first home, the Protestant Reformation in Germany and Switzerland and British Protestantism, particularly in its Puritan and Scottish Presbyterian form. Each, in a way, has had an influence on the subject at hand.

Judaism was born out of idolatry. The earliest and, in many ways, most important idea in Judaism is monotheism: "The Lord our God is one". The other nations of the Mesopotamian Basin had many gods, symbolized by a bewildering array of idols. Israel was convinced that God was one, Jahweh was His name. He was the God even of the nations which did not recognize Him. God, in early Jewish theology, was majestic, magnificent: He could not be contained in a block of carved wood or stone. In fact, to attempt so to contain Him was blasphemy. "You shall have no other gods before me" is the first commandment. And the second spells it out in detail: "You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath...You shall not bow down to them and serve them." What's

a graven image? Does that mean that God doesn't want people to draw pictures or wear jewelry fashioned to look like stars or apples or frogs? What it means is that Israel cannot be Israel and practice the same kind of religion as all her neighbors. God is one. He requires no idol. It is no coincidence that at the very moment Moses was up on the mountain talking to God about the rules, the people were down in the valley paying the Canaanite priests of Baal to build a golden calf so they could worship it. They preferred that,you see, because Baal worship wasn't quite as rigorous as Jahweh worship. Jews had to make sacrifices and behave themselves. In the cult of Baal worship meant having a party and getting drunk.

From the beginning, idolatry has been the threat. Jewish scholar, Heinrich Gratz observes that "paganism sees its god: Judaism hears him." (Journal of Current Social Issues, Fall, 1978, Art as Prayer, Joseph Gutmann, p.75ff). That's first: the primal Hebrew abhorrence of idols.

Our second historical source is the environment for the birth and growth of the Christian Church - the culture of Greece and Rome. As you know, it was a sophisticated culture artistically. And so visual art was part of the Christian experience from the outset. Sculpture and painting were done for the church and by the church. During the Dark Ages the monasteries kept the old culture alive until, in the Rennaissance, it was reborn in the greatest explosion of art in the history of the world. Much of it was commissioned by, paid for and installed in the church.

The trouble is that sometimes people forgot that art points elsewhere. Sometimes, in the minds of the people the work of art became the thing it represented, so that a sculpture of St. Jude actually became St. Jude; and prayers to the Virgin Mary, said in front of an icon the purpose of which was to help the believer understand the Virgin Mary, actually were said to the piece of sculpture. The trouble is that art is very powerful and when people forget that art is art and God is God, idolatry becomes an immediate possibility. That's what it looked like, frankly, to the Reformers.

To make matters worse, the visual arts were allied with the pomp and power which contrasted so vividly with the simplicity of the Word of God they had rediscovered.

A Lutheran Reformer, Karlstadt, pulled down all the images in the former Roman now Lutheran Church of which he was pastor. Across Germany zealous Reformers followed suit: the intricably carved wood and stone rood screens were smashed, icons, relics, paintings and tapestries burned, and sculptures dragged into the streets. In Zurich, Huldrich Zwingli personally supervised the removal of all art objects from the cathedral and the white washing of the walls.

The Word of God, God's self-revelation, in the Reformation, became exclusively the written words of the Bible and the spoken words of the Reformers. As you can understand it was one of the most important developments that ever occurred in Western civilization. It is related to universal education and literacy and the particular incredible intellectual development of the West. But, at the same time it robbed Western Christianity of an entire mode of expressing itself. The rediscovery of the Word of God in the written and spoken words of men is both the genius and poverty of Protestantism.

There is a fourth source for our traditions: British Puritanism. John Dillenberger, President of the Hartford Seminary Foundation, who lectured at the Columbus Gallery last spring observes wryly that Catholic and Protestant history differs geographically as well as theologically: and that Meditarranean ease with the body, nurtured by climate and natural exposure contrasts with the clothed and cold north.

"As one moves from south to north, the senses narrow and inescapably internalized." (Current Social Issues, Fall, 1968, Faith and Sensitivity, p.62).

Henry VIII ripped the art out of the monasteries to demonstrate who was King. Cromwell did it for theological reasons. That, plus the climate, say the scholars, is the reason the British have majored in furniture, china, jewelry, and gardens, and minored in sculpture and painting. Their greatest genius has been the word. Dillenberger notes that "Just as England had no counterpart to Michelangelo, Raphael and Rembrandt, the continent had no counterpart to Shakespeare, Donne and Milton." (Op.cit., p.64).

English Puritans were afraid that anything which could powerfully affect the human emotions, could interfere with a person's obedience to the will of God. Anything a person loved too much; music, art, poetry, drama, games - had to be curtailed for the health of the soul.

Those are out roots: they contain many of the reasons why it is unusual and important for serious art, a piece of sculpture, to appear in the sanctuary of a Protestant Church. Professor Joseph Gutman of Wayne State summarizes: "In the absence of a truly religious art, both the synagogue and the church have had to be content with art styles emerging from the secular sphere. Often the result is that saccharine melodramatic Madonnas are endorsed by the church, just as bearded, sentimentalized, pietistic Rabbis...are accepted...This art is vacuous, lacking any enduring power to move or challenge. It cannot be expected to arouse sentiments which demand a genuinely deep emotional involvement." (Ibid, p.77).

That, happily, is not the situation at Broad Street Presbyterian Church. What we have is serious art. Laying history aside I should like now to reflect on the sculpture and Paintings.

The imagination of the artist, Jack Greaves, stimulated it. It was his idea to do a Christ figure. I confess that I resisted it emotionally and intellectually at first; there was no precedent for it in my own experience. I could not remember ever seeing a sculpture of Jesus in a Protestant Church. (I have since discovered a triumphant and heroic sculpture of the risen Christ in the back of Riverside Church, New York City, high above the balcony.) But the more I thought it through the more I concluded that my hesitation was not terribly rational; that no Presbyterian Christian was going to confuse this work of art with the person of Jesus Christ: that no one was going to worship it - and that to the ultimate question, "Why not?" there were no legitimate answers. It was a happy decision, even if by default.

Once the decision to proceed was reached by the artist and donors the Session of this Church exercised real courage and intelligent leadership by approving unanimously. The artist and I began a kind of unscheduled and unstructured dialogue. We talked about churches and Christianity and Jesus and the role of the church and the different ways people perceive and hear and see the same things.

I thought you might be interested in some of the things he wrote to me from England while working on this project. On December 4, 1978 Mr. Greaves wrote: "The initial concept which was slightly Byzantine in style with the ornamental halo has been systematically abandoned and I really think, because I am a product of a more humanistic age I have sculptured a Christ - the Man - the Teacher. And yet not just a man. I read that when Donatello as a young sculptor had carved a crucifix he asked

his friend Filippo Brunellesci to see the work. When he saw it he is reported to have said,'It is not Christ but a peasant which thou has crucified'." Mr. Greaves, who claims not to be a theologian, here was dealing with the central affirmation - and the abiding mystery of the Christian faith; the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, God among us in the life of a man, a peasant. Mr. Greaves described Him: "A man who has spent time alone in the wilderness, who has walked and traveled hard in a very hard land."

The title of this sermon came from that same letter in which he wrote, "One of my artist friends said, after seeing the sculpture, 'It is a Christ for our time'."

The work invites you to respond, to see and interpret what you see on the basis of your own sensitivities. What I can do, will now do, in conclusion, is to tell you what I see and what it stimulates in me.

I see, first, the man Jesus. From the earliest days of our history, we Christians have been struggling with His humanity. Our faith is that God dwelt in Him: that He was and is the divine Son of God. Our faith is that He was also totally a man. In reality, we have often placed Him somewhere between deity and humanity. About one hundred years after His life the early Christians started to hedge on that issue. He only seemed to be human, they said. He didn't really hurt and get tired and angry and hungry. He didn't really die. It has been one of the more enduring heresies. A heavenly Christ is simply not very real. An ethereal teacher, gentle, meek and mild makes our faith "other worldly" and irrelevant. Swinburne, with great sarcasm, called Him the "Pale Galilean": and that is what He becomes, not human, not real, not important. I see a reminder in this art that the Lord of the Church, my Lord, was a man: that He lived the same life I am living and felt the same things I have felt: that in Him God has experienced my anxieties and worries and noble dreams: that in this life God has taken on himself my own fear of death - my dying. All of that depends on a Lord who was human.

I am reminded in the most literal sense, of what He taught: that out of His own rich Judaic faith something new emerged: the imperative to love. More subtly I am reminded that there are two major thrusts to His teaching: two sides, therefore, to the Christian faith: two assignments for the church which bears His name.

The raised right hand, traditional posture of teaching, reminds me that we believe He embodies truth. What is true about God and humanity and life and the future, we believe, may be seen in the life of this man. I am reminded that it was He who said that the truth will make us free. Beside that right hand of truth is the prototype teaching parable: a Roundel depicting the Parable of the Sower and the Seed... He's carefree, there is a certain confident abandon in the way he does his job. He knows that God will provide growth if he is a faithful sower. That, for me, is one half of our purpose: not to save souls. God will take care of that. But to tell the truth: to witness to the truth as we perceive it.

The left hand, stretched out compellingly, powerfully, is love in action. It is the hand of healing, and feeding and friendship welcoming. Over it is a remarkable painting of love's imperative: the road to Jericho through the eyes of a man from Samaria who, in stopping to help a wounded traveler, illustrated the new morality of Jesus. The picture draws me in. It invites an ethical decision: will you stop and help, or pass by on the other side?

The two great ideas of Christian faith: the word of truth and the act of love, have often been wrenched apart. One has been emphasized over the other and the dichotomy has caused dissidence and conflict throughout the whole Christian Church. On the right, the evangelicals want to tell the story of Jesus. On the left, the social activists want to liberate the oppressed. The right wants to save souls, the left wants to change society. The right wants to study the Bible, the left wants National Health Care. The right wants peace of mind: the left wants peace between nations. One of the tragedies of our time is that the church has so frequently yielded to the temptation to go in one direction or the other. Leslie Newbigin, British theologian, writes about what results when Christian people allow that to happen: "programs for justice, severed from the liturgical life of the congregation, lose their character as signs of the presence of Christ and become crusades fueled by self-righteous moralism. And the life of a worshipping congregation, apart from compassionate service to the secular community risks becoming self-centered, serving only the needs and desires of its members." (The Open Secret, p.11). Jesus said both. Jesus held them both together in His teaching and in His life.

I believe Presbyterianism has that to offer the whole,diverse institutional church. We are not the largest church, by far. But we keep struggling to hold together the two sides, the two poles on the spectrum and thus the wholeness of the Gospel. That is also, the uniqueness and greatness of this particular church. We are here for a purpose. God has given us a job to do. He wants us to keep telling the story as our predecessors did before us. But He has given us a new assignment. Part of it, I believe, is to express, here, the wholeness of the Gospel: to love one another; to teach the truth; and to do the truth in acts of reconciling justice and love.

Mrs. Huntington, Mrs. Pace and Mr. Greaves have given us something to think about for a long, long time to come. In fact, I'm inclined to believe that they haven't been in this thing alone: that someone else has been pushing and prodding and inspiring: that God has had a hand in it all along. That is a very old idea. It comes from a marvelous story I discovered this week from the Midrash,the collection of early Rabbinic literature. "Twice Moses ascended to Mt. Sinai to receive instruction about the Menorah, and twice he forgot the instructions on his descent. The third time,God took a Menorah of fire and showed him every detail of it. And yet Moses found it hard to form a clear conception of the Menorah. Finally God told him, 'Go to Bezelel, the artist in the desert. He will make it.' Moses did as instructed. The artist made a beautiful Menorah with ease. Moses cried in amazement, 'To me it was shown many times by the Holy One, blessed by He, yet I found it hard to grasp; but you, without seeing it, could fashion it with your intelligence. Surely you must have been standing in the shadow of God, while the Holy One was showing me its construction'." (Op. cite Journal of Social Issues).

That, it seems to me, is the open-ended conclusion suggested by our tradition, faith and experience. God's word is spoken in many different ways. We are experiencing a new one: we are standing in a new shadow.

Amen.

God of mystery and majesty, we give thanks for the clear perceptions of artists. Help us to see what they see. God of love, thank you for Jesus, Your Son, our Lord for His words of truth; for His gracious and compassionate life. O God, bless us, as we follow Him; give us strength to love one another and to serve as our neighbors; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.